

Greater Than – 10 Spiritual Equations that Equal Joy

(Show stylistic greater than symbol) We are beginning a new series this morning called Greater Than. Greater than. I was just a C student in math, but this was a symbol I could understand. A math text tells me that the greater than symbol “is a basic math symbol which is used to represent the inequality between two values. One is greater than the other. Greater than. Something more. Of superior worth. Of better quality.

Five is greater than two. Two cookies is greater than one. I found a place selling t-shirts online claiming that dogs were greater than people. Food was greater than work. Books were greater than reality. You could have some fun with this. I’ll give you a greater than equation, but one part of it is blank and you have to fill in the blank.

- Chocolate is > _____
- _____ is > Ice Cream
- Fishing is _____ Shopping
- Cats _____ Dogs
- KC Royals are _____ St. Louis Cardinals
- Jesus is > _____

(Advance Slide) I was curious, so I searched my Logos Bible software and did a little word search. The phrase “greater than” occurs 38 times in the NIV Bible. 40 in the ESV, and its split almost equally between the old and new testaments.

In Genesis 48, Joseph takes his two sons to be blessed by his father Jacob. Jacob offers the firstborn blessing to the youngest Ephraim instead of the firstborn Manasseh. Joseph thinking it was a mistake, tries to correct his father, but Jacob knew exactly what he doing saying that younger brother will be “*greater than*” the oldest.

In 1 Kings 1:37 it is said that Solomon’s throne will be greater than his father David’s. In 2 Chronicles 2:5 Solomon wants to build a great temple for God, because he is “*greater than*” all other gods and that’s a claim that’s made multiple times in Scripture, “*God is greater than all other gods.*”

In Matthew 11:11 Jesus says that even the least in the Kingdom of heaven is “*greater than*” John the Baptist. In Mark 12:31 Jesus tells us there are no commandments “*greater than*” the commandments to love God and love people. An elderly apostle John assures us in 1 John 4:4 that “*the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.*”

In fact, there a number of truths and realities that the Bible affirms are greater than what the world tries to sell us. Can we be honest this morning? Does the world even have a clue of what things are really worth? Was a bitcoin ever really worth \$20,000? On February 16, 2021 an artist known as **Beeple sold a digital collage of 5,000 mostly offensive pictures and doodles that**

exists only online for \$69 million. Is that really worth more than a Rembrandt? Is a \$20 roll of Renova toilet paper really worth more than a whole package of Charmin ultrasoft? How about gold plated staples for \$175 or a Louis Vuitton Skateboard for more than \$8,000, or you can get your very own carbon fiber toilet seat for \$249? Nothing like going in style.

(Advance Slide) And celebrities. Those stars of towering intellect who influence culture and shape the direction of public opinion. They do Public Service Announcements and post on Twitter telling us what to think. How would they know one thing is greater than another? Beyonce once spent \$100,000 on gold leggings. Nicolas Cage spent \$275,000 on a Dinosaur skull that he had to return to Mongolia because it had been stolen. Paris Hilton bought a Dog House for \$300,000. That's a hundred thou more than my house. Mike Tyson spent 2.3 million on a gold bathtub. Bono bought a \$1,500 plane ticket for his hat. Why would we listen to a thing they have to tell us.

The problem is they're not alone. Somebody on Reddit asked, "What's the dumbest purchase you've made?" and the thread blew up as thousands and thousands of people confessed their own braindead purchases. Somebody's boyfriend was sent out to buy vegetables for dinner. He came back with a kayak, but forgot the vegetables. They never used the kayak. One guy bought a \$2,000 double neck guitar that he never learned how to play. One lady traded a rather rare book to a used book store because she had two copies. A month later she bought her own book back because it was rare and she didn't think she had a copy. Someone else copped to buying \$100 of virtual clothes for their videogame character. I'm sure though that no one here has ever paid the stupid tax for something you should have just walked away from, right?

Imagine you went into a store one day and someone had switched all the price tags around. Somebody hacked the computer system, and items were scanning for ridiculous amounts. Thousand dollar appliances are selling for a buck. \$3 tubes of toothpastes set you back \$3000. \$500 handbags are going for .50. But you go to the gumball machine and it has a credit card reader, because that stale, old gumball is now \$750.

This actually happened years ago when they actually put individual price tags on each item. Some pranksters broke into the store in the middle of the night. They didn't rob the safe. They didn't steal anything. They simply switched around a bunch of price tags, and the results the next morning were pure chaos.

This is exactly what Satan has done in our world. He's switched all the price tags. He's convinced us to value the wrong things. We take what deserves to be handled with great care and we treat it as though it has little value. Then we turn around and make great sacrifices to pursue things that last only a fleeting moment. We've forgotten which things are greater than. We will work long hours while sacrificing the few years we have our young children. We will throw away years invested in a marriage for a few moments of pleasure. We throw away our

integrity in pursuit of fleeting feelings that fade in a moment. We place such a high value on our bodies, but have no regard for our soul. Satan has changed all the price tags, and it's more than a harmless prank, but a deadly deception with eternal consequences.

I don't know about you, but all of this confusion can make it hard for me to keep my own head straight about what things are greater than others. Sometimes I can't tell the difference between trinkets and treasure. Why would I pass up on gold and diamonds to clutch plastic Mardi Gras beads? But I do.

So, we're going to take the next 10 weeks to talk about which things are truly greater than. We're going to put the price tags back where they belong. The things that the world says lead to happiness really don't. It's like spending way too much on a product that cannot deliver what it advertised. We are going to look at ten spiritual greater than equations that equal true joy. When you understand these ten things that are truly greater than their alternative, then you will know what is of true value and you can find lasting joy.

This morning serves as an introduction to the whole series. It explains what we're doing and why. So let me explain briefly the idea behind this series and where it came from, and then I want to walk us through the process we'll going through these next few weeks, and the biblical principle behind it.

There's an app I use called Evernote, and it's a cloudbased notetaking, record keeping, and organizing app. I use it to do so ordinary things like organize receipts. Mostly, though, I started using it to store, organize, tag and track my sermon illustrations— good stories, funny jokes, important statistics, and insightful articles. Anytime I run across something good, I put it in Evernote, tag it, title it, and then I can use it later.

I also have an Evernote file for sermon ideas. If I have a random idea in the middle of the night, I grab my phone, put it in Evernote and I don't forget it in the morning. Sometimes these things begin as a simple concept or a theme, or maybe just a catchy title. As time goes on I develop these ideas, and add to them and put flesh on the bones.

One of these concepts was this idea of Greater Than. My original idea was a series on grace. Here's what's written down in my Evernote.

1. Grace is greater than your sin.
2. Grace is greater than your status
3. Grace is greater than your fear
4. Grace is greater than your doubt
5. Grace is greater than your past
6. Grace is greater than your hurt
7. Grace is greater than your success

That would be a great 7-part series. I may still use that someday. But as I was building on this idea and researching it, I came across an interview with an author that wrote this book *The Happy Christian – Ten ways to be a joyful believer in a gloomy world*. He talked about 10 biblical formulas that lead to a more joyful life. Ordinarily, this is the kind of thing I wouldn't touch, but his story intrigued me, and I found the biblical content compelling and relevant, so here we are.

The author is David Murray. He's a Bible college professor. He's a pastor. He's a theology nerd. He made a bit of a name for himself years ago when he wrote a book called *Christians Get Depressed Too*. This really helped a lot of believers be more open about their struggles with depression. He challenged the church to minister to these people in a more loving and understanding way. He jokes that he became known as Mr. Depression.

A few years later, Murray read the NY Times bestseller *The Happiness Project* which follows the work of several positive psychologists who were attempting to research happiness from a purely scientific perspective. Traditional psychology focuses on the negative. "Why are people so unhappy and how can we fix their problems," These researchers, who became known as the happy scientists, asked this question, "what makes people happy and how can we help them flourish?" They proceeded to study the happiest people they could find. They made some fascinating and helpful findings. But Murray thought, "Surely Christian can do better." After all we have the ultimate truth that produces far more joy.

That's where he developed the idea of these 10 Biblical equations that equal greater joy. If we do our spiritual math correctly, we will live more fulfilled lives. But these spiritual calculations require a change in our thinking.

I want to take you through a Biblical process that can make a difference in nearly every area of life. The process is this: where your mind goes; your life will follow. We begin in Romans 12:2:

Our Thinking Leads Our Lives - Romans 12:2

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Our thinking has to be changed. Paul says, "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Changed thinking leads to changed lives. The Greek word Paul uses for transformed here is the same word from which we get metamorphosis. The changing of your mind transforms your life. This has to happen because we have been conformed to the pattern of the world. We are living as caterpillars even though we were meant to be butterflies.

Over the last few years, my girls have had this running joke with their uncle over cat butts. Each Christmas there has been an exchange of pictures and coloring books all themed around the hindquarters of the feline species. This year we purchased these cat butt cookie cutters, so they

could make cat butt shaped Christmas cookies. They could send cat butt cookies with strategically placed Hershey kisses to their uncle Tim. This is all for fun and laughs.

But imagine that the world has this cookie cutter that tries to force you into its shape. A literal translation of the first part of this verse is, *“Do not let the world press you into its mold.”* This was the word the Greeks used for minting a coin. You would hammer a bit of molten metal with a hammer that has an embossed image of the emperor on it. The world is the hammer and Satan swings that hammer to pound his image into your life.

The only way to resist this conformity in your life is to change your thinking to change your life.

Notice, however, that we can't just change our thinking on our own. The verse doesn't say, *“Renew your own mind.”* *“Transform your own life.”* This is written in a passive voice. This is something that happens to you. Something renews your mind. This then renews your life. This is where modern psychology or therapy is insufficient to the need. This transformation is something that someone else has to do for us. Remember, you were created in the image of God. You are being renewed in the image of Jesus. It's not something we accomplish on our own.

Our Thinking Betrays Us - 2 Corinthians 10:5

Next, we go to 2 Corinthians 10. Paul here is defending his ministry. He makes the point that it is really a spiritual battle behind all the attacks on his ministry. Paul says, *“We do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.”* This is a different kind of battle. It is a war for our minds. It's a battle over how we think. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul says,

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Whose thoughts is he talking about there? His own. He's fighting to take his own thoughts captive.

Satan has declared war on our minds. There are open hostilities against the way you think. We've seen some of the horrific images coming out of Ukraine—bombed out buildings, long lines of shuffling refugees, burned out vehicles, both military and civilian. Rockets streaking the skies. Skylines dominated by pillars of smoke rather than tall buildings.

Imagine such images are an expression of what's going on in the folds of your grey matter. You're fighting for a mind that recognizes the truth, can hold onto truth, has the ability to think freely, the discernment to quickly recognize the difference between what's right and what's wrong, but there are mines, there are ambushes, there are flank attacks.

The battle for our minds is so fierce, that we have to take our own thoughts captive. Our own thoughts lead us astray. I don't know about you, but my own thinking betrays me all the time.

I'm doing good. I'm in the word. I'm living in obedience, then –boom- I have this stray thought that takes me in dangerous direction. If I don't immediately defeat it, take that thought captive, it will undo me.

Our minds are prone to wander. We must learn to take our thinking captive. This is a huge struggle. Most of us want to follow wherever our thoughts lead us. We don't want to confront our own thinking. We don't want to tell ourselves we're wrong. The world says, "You do you," but God says in Prov. 14:12, "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.*" We have to take our thoughts captive and control our thinking.

Our Thinking Can Be Focused - Philippians 4:8

Next we move to Philippians 4:8 which gives us a strategy for renewing our minds and taking our thoughts captive.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

We have the power to direct our thinking. Our thoughts follow what we set our minds on. **Have you ever been driving somewhere, and you're following the directions on Google maps or Apple Maps, and all the sudden the directions go haywire.** It tells you to turn left, and when you do it says to make a U-turn. The little car in the center of your screen starts spinning in circles. You don't know where you're going. You're downtown in the middle of a city in the midst of all these tall buildings and your GPS can't connect with the satellites. Your GPS has lost calibration. You have to recalibrate.

Sometimes, our mind loses its calibration. We lose our ability to navigate life. We confuse lies for the truth. Our thinking gets all messed up. We have to recalibrate our thinking. We have to reset the true north of our internal compass. Scripture says we do this by what we set our minds on. This is why Paul says we have to fix our minds on things that are true, honorable, just pure, and lovely.

Imagine that in your brain there is a target reticle, a cross hairs that sets your thinking on a certain thing. What are the cross hairs of your mind set on right now?

When you set your thinking on the right things, the truth becomes more clear, the right decisions become more obvious. But the further away from these things we get, the crazier everything gets. The right decision becomes clear as mud. Our internal compass starts spinning wildly.

Back when I was studying computer programming, there was an expression we used – GIGO. Garbage In Garbage Out. Computers don't do what you want them to do. They do exactly what

you tell them to do. This was to challenge us to be very careful in our programming. Triple check our formulas and commands, so that the computer is going to do the proper calculations.

The same happens in our thinking. We want certain results. We want this kind of life, but our life always follows our thinking, and if our thinking is set on the wrong things, then our lives will always end up in the wrong place, no matter how much we wish it was different.

So we have to change our thinking if we want to change our lives. That's what we will be doing over the next 10 weeks. We will be refocusing our minds, fixing our thoughts on the biblical truths that Gods are greater than what the world tells us. But for any of this to help, you must first recognize that there is some thinking in your life that needs to change. You've got to be honest about where the crosshairs of your thinking are targeted. Some of your basic assumptions about life are misplaced and your spiritual math is wrong.

Perhaps our first greater than should be this – what God says > what the world says. What God says is greater than what the world says, no matter how many voices are saying it. No matter how loud, or how insistent those voices are. What God says is greater no matter how unpopular it is. What God says is greater no matter if Twitter or Facebook take it down because it doesn't fit with their agenda.